Language Conflict in Algeria

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Language Conflict in Algeria

From Colonialism to Post-Independence

Mohamed Benrabah

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In memory of my parents,
And for Selina and Mohamed Nouri Amine

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It's a tough job being Algerian
Tahar Djaout* (quoted in Šukys, 2007: 14)

* Tahar Dajout is the first writer-journalist assassinated during the purge of intellectuals in Algeria in the 1990s. His murder in May 1993 attributed to Islamist extremists put an end to a promising writing career.

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Prologue: Two Cultural Wars in 50 Years

The long French attempt to crush anything but French culture in Algeria, culminating in a murderous war that finally brought independence, surely contributed to the extremist tendencies seen there today.

Edward H. Thomas (1999: 27)

You could read a dozen large tomes on the history of Islam from its very beginnings and you still wouldn't understand what is going on in Algeria. But read 30 pages on colonialism and decolonisation and then you'll understand quite a lot.

Amin Maalouf (2003: 66)

The above epigraphs were both written in the closing years of Algeria's 10-year long civil war called the Black Decade – in 1998 for Maalouf's and in 1999 for Thomas'. The 1990s violence began when the Algerian government cancelled the December 1991 parliamentary elections won by the religious fundamentalists of the Islamic Salvation Front (F.I.S. in French). The F.I.S.'s response was an armed struggle against the secular state apparatus. From the outset, the religious–secular dichotomy seems to apply to the strife of the 1990s. In reality, the conflict is cultural with language playing not a negligible role. And colonial history is largely responsible for this murderous war.

On the subject of extreme violence, Algeria hit the headlines twice over the last 50 years of the 20th century. The first time was during the War of Independence (1954–1962), and the second during the Black Decade. On each occasion, conflict arose between two mutually exclusive cultural groups: first, the colonizer and the colonized; and later, between the dominant Francophones and the Arabizers.

The cultural misunderstandings between the colonizers and the colonized began when colonialism brought the European and the indigenous Arabo-Berber worlds into violent contact. It resulted from the Franco-centric presumption that French civilization was superior to local cultures. France's 'civilizing mission' implied the domination of its language and culture, and eventually the eradication of indigenous idioms and traditions. Similarly, the colonized Algerians were convinced of the superiority of their own Islamic civilization. This led them to resist all efforts toward colonial assimilation and cultural interpenetration. For over a century and a quarter, the two irreconcilable communities could not be made to agree, and the War of Liberation erupted on 1 November 1954 (All Saints' Day) and ended in July 1962. The atrocities committed during this struggle have been described by historian Alistair Horne as 'undeniably and horribly savage' (Horne, 1987: 12).

These atrocities stemmed from France's mode of colonization. Following their conquest of the three countries of the Maghreb – Algeria in 1830, Tunisia in 1881 and Morocco in 1912 – the French managed these territories differently. While Tunisia and Morocco became Protectorates, Algeria was the most 'French' of France's overseas possessions. The French considered Algeria as a territorial extension of France itself, and they implemented a deliberate policy of European settlement, cultural assimilation and attendant linguistic Frenchification. When the uprising began in 1954, French politicians (from across the spectrum) were caught at a major disadvantage. In fact, beliefs in the supremacy of their language and culture blinded them till the very end. Even when the French doubted the efficiency of their policy of 'assimilation' and modified it into a policy of 'integration' ('association'), they never questioned their 'mission' or the superiority of their language and culture. In 1958, Charles de Gaulle's Prime Minister, Michel Debré, declared that every person 'from Dunkirk to Tamanrasset' was a Frenchman (Gordon, 1962: 97). One year later, a French scholar claimed that colonized Algerians were crying out for the French language. What is more, many Frenchmen regarded violence in Algeria as 'terrorism' rather than as the fight of a subjugated people for liberation. The 'One and Indivisible French Republic' could not tolerate political and cultural turmoil within its borders, and France considered the Algerian revolutionaries' demands as treasonable.

The War of Independence was a traumatic experience with long-lasting effects for all communities. In the military field, the French counter-revolutionary strategy aimed at draining the sea to asphyxiate the 'fish' and, thus, deprive Algerian fighters of contact with the population which provided them with food and shelter. So 'regroupment camps' and 'pacification zones' began to appear in 1954, and then spread across the populated areas of the North of Algeria in 1957–1958. By 1960, the French army had relocated

around two million villagers – representing 24% of the total Muslim population living in Algeria. This conflict brought death to an estimated one million Algerian Muslims, and approximately 800,000 non-Muslims were sent into exile. For example, following the mass exodus of 1962, the Jewish community had completely vanished by the beginning of the 21st century – there were around 130,000 Jews in 1948, roughly half of Arabo-Berber origin and half of Jewish descendants expelled from Spain in 1391 and 1492.

Independent Algeria's almost homogeneous religious culture meant a Muslim state for all. The nationalist leaders of decolonization expressed their social and cultural will without facing any strong opposition from powerful religious minorities. They did it through the policy of linguistic Arabization which followed the French model – that is, they imposed Literary (Classical) Arabic on all society, and this proved as exclusive as the colonial policy it sought to supplant. This method of Arabization turned out to be an Islamization process with tragic consequences. According to several observers, the hasty implementation of an exclusively Arabic monolingual educational system in the late 1960s and early 1970s led to the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, xenophobia, chauvinism and obscurantism. This generated what became known as the Black Decade, with a death toll estimated between 120,000 and 200,000 victims. Displaced populations were estimated to be between 1 and 1.5 million, and the number of people arrested and made to 'disappear' by Algerian security forces and their allies rose to more than 7000. Some analysts characterized the strife of the 1990s as 'cultural civil war' or linguistic 'intellectual cleansing'. The victims were generally secular and/or Francophone Algerians. Intellectual cleansing involved the purging from society of 'impure' influences, like intellectual and creative thinkers. The most emblematic victim of this purge is Tahar Djaout, the writer-journalist assassinated in May 1993. Soon after the attack on Djaout, a man who had been tortured appeared on Algerian television and was presented as an Islamist terrorist. He professed that Djaout had been murdered for '[t]wo reasons: first of all because he was a Communist. Secondly because he had a formidable pen. He knew how to express himself, he had a great deal of influence over Muslims' (Šukys, 2007: 29). The second reason evoked here echoes one of the slogans used by Algerian Muslim fundamentalists in the 1990s: 'Those who fight with the pen will perish by the sword.'

The conflict of the 1990s forced into exile thousands of highly skilled and mainly Francophone Algerians. The majority settled in France. According to an OECD report published in 2004, out of one million exiles from the Arab world, Algeria had the highest number of university-qualified expatriates: 214,000 Algerians, 202,000 Egyptians, 110,000 Lebanese and 83,000 Iraqis. In 2004, historian Pierre Vermeren claimed that the French

authorities, who refused to publish figures, admitted unofficially that between 200,000 and 300,000 Algerian intellectuals and their families had settled in France since the beginning of the 1990s. In his opinion, the real estimates stood around 500,000 (Vermeren, 2004: 320).

As of July 2012, Algeria celebrated half a century of independence from French rule. Algerian independence was proclaimed on 5 July 1962, following the defeat of the French who had colonized the country for 132 years. It was mainly the French who introduced a practice unknown to Algerians before France's conquest of their country: cultural polarization by means of language. The Algerian decolonizing elites reproduced this alienation after 1962 through the politicization of the language question. And the struggles linked to language use persist to this day (the autumn of 2012).

Language Conflict in Algeria: From Colonialism to Post-Independence is a book about the use of languages as a proxy for conflict. It is the biography of a historic phenomenon introduced by imperial France into communities unaccustomed to politicizing linguistic issues. The French aggressive occupation was traumatic for Algerians who felt insecure and uncertain regarding their identity. To regain or assert a sense of cultural individuality, Algeria's elites adopted the policy of Arabization in order to reduce divisions linked to language, and to contribute to the overall development of the country. But instead of reducing linguistic antagonisms within society, the politics of language has become itself a source of serious problems in post-independent Algeria. This book deals with linguistic issues as a way to explain the turbulent seas of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries of Algerian history. As we embark on this journey, we must first introduce the necessary conceptual tools related to the central issue of this book, 'language conflict'. Subsequently, in Chapters 2–5 and in the Epilogue, the concepts developed in the first chapter are applied to the colonial and post-colonial histories of Algeria.

1 Circumnavigating a Term: 'Language Conflict' and Related Concepts

Language conflict can occur anywhere there is language contact, chiefly in multilingual communities
Peter Nelde (2002: 330)

[C]olonial bilingualism cannot be compared to just any linguistic dualism
Albert Memmi (1974: 107)

[L]anguage planning activity may itself ultimately be the cause of serious problems as well as conflicts
Ernst Hakon Jahr (1993: 1)

[S]trategies of resistance [are] a typical reaction to overt political and linguistic oppression
Rajend Mesthrie *et al.* (2000: 333)

Several notions and concepts linked to the idea of 'language conflict' are discussed in this chapter. Most of them will serve as reference points later in the book. By way of introducing these terminological terms, examples from around the world have been gathered to illustrate manifestations of language conflict. And emphasis has been placed on issues connected with the linguistic effects of colonialism, and the consequences of decolonization and nation-building.

Language Contact and Domination

One thing that all demonstrations of language conflict have in common is that they have originated in contact situations, chiefly in multilingual

communities. A simple definition of language contact can be the use of more than one language in the same place – geographical area or speech community – at the same time. It is interesting to note that not all language contacts produce strife for there are contacts that lack any conflict component. Language conflict arises when people try to carve out a space for their own tongue which expands to other linguistic 'territories'. The metaphorical expression of 'language spread', coined by Robert Cooper, refers to the processes that allow an increase in the number of users and uses of a language (Cooper, 1982: 6). When languages spread to other linguistic 'spaces', they produce 'tension, resentment, and differences of opinion that are characteristic of every competitive social structure' (Nelde, 1997: 289). Conflicts and the bitter argument over linguistic issues that emerge as a result of linguistic rivalry and competition are often called 'language wars'.

The origin of the metaphorical expression 'language war' goes back to the early 20th century. Between 1890 and 1913, a bitter argument took place among the Yishuv, the Jewish community of Palestine. Like the Jews of Eastern Europe and the United States, members of the Yishuv began using Hebrew as a vernacular. Language became thus an essential marker of nationhood, or the mechanisms of we-group-building and the main patterns of national integration. These are forms of inclusion and exclusion in the collective or national identity, and forms of 'Othering' to produce the antithesis of 'We'. In Ottoman Palestine, there was rivalry between Hebrew and two varieties of German considered as 'enemies'. The first 'enemy' was Yiddish, the mother tongue of European Jews. Yiddish offered a plausible alternative as a language of national individuality, and public linguistic fights proved intense. By 1910, the struggle between the two Jewish linguistic forms ended in favour of Hebrew even though strong campaigns against Yiddish continued until 1936. The fight against the second 'enemy' was a quick battle and became known as the Language War. The rival was German, widely accepted as the language of advanced science and learning at the beginning of the 20th century. To spread their language and culture in the Middle East, the Germans created in 1901 a network of schools ranging from kindergarten to teachers' training college known as Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden. They aimed at offsetting the influence of French, another world language supported by the Paris-based Jewish organization Alliance Israëlite Universelle. In 1912, the Hilfsverein began building a technological tertiary institute in Haifa. The board of the institute based in Berlin announced in 1913 that the new institution would use Hebrew as the language of instruction for general subjects and German for science and technology. To justify their choice, the board argued that Hebrew could not handle scientific concepts. The board's ruling angered pro-Hebrew teachers and students from the Hilfsverein who

joined strikes and public demonstrations. These actions had a positive effect and the board's decision was revoked (Spolsky, 2009: 186–188; Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999: 185; 2001: 357–358).

Interethnic language conflicts are by far the most common types of linguistic competition. Rivalry between Yiddish and Hebrew mentioned above is an example of this. And the struggle between German and French in the Palestine of the early 20th century shows how nations in pursuit of geopolitical supremacy can produce antagonisms. But tensions can also occur within an individual who masters more than one language, a case described as inter-lingual conflict. The complex problem associated with bilinguals concerns the question of identity crisis. While many bilingual people do not have any problem with identity, others find it a problematic issue, especially in contexts of domination (Nelde, 2002: 329–330; Wei, 2006: 11).

Moving back to language spread, its ultimate goal in totalizing forms of dominance is linguistic supremacy to wipe out other languages and cultures. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the usual type of organized language conflict rose from the contact between different linguistic groups with unequal socio-political status. The dominant language group controlled the important institutions in the major social, political and economic spheres. Within this environment, the primary cause of language conflict came from the dominant group's attempt to exclude members of the dominated community from social elevation in the political and economic sectors. And wars of words were ignited by dominant and dominated groups alike. For example, linguistic rivalry in the history of the United States was initiated by the ruling classes and in colonized societies by colonials.

The US never established an official language or a language academy, and since its independence from England, linguistic disputation has recurred regularly with periods of tolerance punctuated by periods of restrictive orientation. Intolerance towards non-Anglophone tongues occurred when an increase in immigration accelerated language diversity. Linguistic pluralism became in this way a salient public issue with the attendant legal protection of English and the restriction of other tongues. Anti-immigrant politics took the form of policies to 'Anglicize' and to 'Americanize' the immigrant. As a result of this, linguistic polarization and the politics of language became just as visceral as issues of race or religion. In truth, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) feared for their dominant position and the loss of political control over key institutions in the country. At times of uncertainty, WASPs sought 'wedge issues' to exploit for partisan purposes. They used the language question as a 'lightning rod' for political attacks from their opponents who addressed the actual underlying causes of the conflict, that is, social and political problems (Crawford, 2000: 1; 2001; Dicker, 1996: 47).